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Towards an Understanding of System Wide Change

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Towards an Understanding of System Wide Change

The big issues of change in our age no longer lie just within organisations or institutions and in the fields of management and organisation studies and we need to prepare ourselves for this reality. Contemporary societies are challenged by international terrorism, mass migration between continents and countries, the malevolent behaviour of financial institutions across international borders, and the efforts of health systems to deal with issues such as safety and obesity. While the struggles to deal with these issues can and do involve institutions, they cannot be understood, ameliorated or resolved by institutional action alone. Some have referred to these macro phenomena as wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973, Head and Alford, 2015), or more recently as grand challenges (Ferraro, Etzon and Gehna, 2015). These metaphors are useful attention directors, but as yet they have neither stimulated the lines of empirical enquiry we need, or provided the appropriate conceptual framework or theory base to underpin the analytical understanding and practical appreciation of the big change issues of the day. This short developmental paper briefly sketched out some of the challenges associated with studying system wide change and the potential approaches which may be useful in addressing these challenges.

System wide change issues perennially involve what Sterman (2001) has called combinatorial and dynamic complexity. Sterman characterises combinatorial complexity as involving multiple, diverse, and inter connected elements. His appropriate reference to dynamic recognises systems in action which are challenged by positive and negative feedback loops and perturbed even by the small changes which can deliver variable and unpredictable effects. Other features of such system wide change include multiple and geographically dispersed stakeholders, divergent interests and values, dispersed and diffused power systems and the perpetual challenge of delivering collective action around change issues which themselves are variously perceived and acted upon. These features of system wide change can all mitigate the forms of emergent and purposeful collective action which may deliver change. So if that collective action occurs, when it occurs, how it occurs and why it occurs represent central mobilizing research questions for any ambitious programme of research on system wide change. The events in the EU in the last several years, first of all grappling with the position of Greece in the EU and now with mass migration from the Middle East and Africa illustrate well the challenges of delivering collective political action and why it is so important for us to

know more about the causes and consequences of different forms of collective action in such contexts.

So what are these features of analytical pluralism required of the studies of system wide change issues? The recognition that processes of change are embedded in contexts creates the need to study the interactive field within which system wide changes are emerging over time (Pettigrew, 1997, 2012, Pettigrew et al, 2001). Specifying the particularities of this interactive field in any study will involve choices about levels of analysis and which of the available processes to focus in on. A source of change in this form of analysis is the asymmetries between levels of context, where the intertwined processes may have their own momentum, pace and trajectory. So context matters, but how much? And what are the spatial and temporal boundaries of any contextual analysis to be? There are, of course, no absolute answers to such pragmatic questions. The answers above all lie in the theoretical framework guiding any project, in the content of the change being examined, and in the resultant researchable questions in mind. One route to providing such an approach is to examine the role of mechanisms in shaping the processes and outcomes of system wide change. Such a mechanism based theory of system wide change is dependent on the incorporation of time, history, process and action in the study of system wide change (Davis and Marquis 2005).

The kinds of research themes and questions focused on in the study of system wide change will demand data sensitive and data intensive studies likely to involve, amongst others, societal and policy elites. Whereas some of these studies can and will be attempted by aspirational individuals, others may necessitate the recruitment and perpetuation of teams of scholars sometimes located across disciplines and fields in particular societies and sometimes on a cross national scale and scope. The study of big themes may necessitate the recruitment and development of big teams. These kinds of leadership and intellectual challenges will be culturally demanding in the present international and scholarly environment (Pettigrew and Starkey 2016). But if our research endeavors are to be phenomenon driven, prescient and impactful in academia and more broadly in society, then some will have to challenge the constraining effects of contemporary academic cultures.

Our paper will discuss the power of mechanism based theorizing about change and stability in strategic action fields and how work in this area can benefit from the theoretical pluralism of multi-disciplinary perspectives combined with ambitious and careful empiricism. We argue

that the understanding and practical appreciation of system wide change needs to become an essential part of the field of management and organization studies. Our paper represents one stepping stone which we hope will encourage many others to venture into this important area of social science and management research.

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